

Response to Public Feedback on Proposed Amendments to the Casino Control (Amendment) Bill

16 August 2012 - The public feedback we received was generally in support of the Government's proposed amendments to the Casino Control (Amendment) Bill. Most respondents provided feedback on social safeguards and gave suggestions to address problem gambling.

The four-week long public consultation exercise on the draft Casino Control (Amendment) Bill ended on 6 August 2012.

In total, we received close to 40 letters on the REACH Portal. Besides these, the Government also consolidated suggestions and views reported in the media and feedback sent directly to the various Government agencies. During the public consultation period, the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) convened four closed-door consultation sessions with stakeholders from various community, grassroots, religious and social service groups. Apart from these, the Government also held consultation sessions with the Integrated Resort (IR) operators.

Based on the feedback received, we found the public to be generally in favour of the Government's proposed amendments to sharpen our casino regulations and to ensure that the IRs continue to contribute to Singapore's tourism industry. The majority of the feedback supported the Government's move to protect financially vulnerable Singaporeans from the harm of casino gambling.

Respondents also raised concerns about non-casino gambling activities, the role of the individual and family in addressing gambling problems, how the IRs' economic contributions ought to be assessed, and raising of the maximum financial penalty that could be imposed on the casino operators.

A summary of the key feedback received and the Government's response is attached at the Annex.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), Ministry of Finance (MOF), and the Casino Regulatory Authority (CRA) would like to thank all who have participated in the public consultation exercise on the draft Casino Control (Amendment) Bill. We will consider all feedback received as we finalise the legislative amendments. We target to table the Casino Control (Amendment) Bill in Parliament at the end of the year.

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Casino Control (Amendment) Bill: Summary of Feedback and Government's Response

The four-week long public consultation on the draft Casino Control (Amendment) Bill ended on 6 August 2012. Generally, members of the public were in support of the proposed amendments.

A majority of the feedback received was in the area of social safeguards. These include feedback received from stakeholders consulted by the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG). The Government also received some feedback on the gaming and economic aspects of the amendments.

Casino Visit Limit System

Many members of the public supported the proposal to impose a limit on the number of visits that financially vulnerable patrons can make to the casinos. They appreciated that the visit limit system offers an intermediate option, in circumstances where an entry ban under casino exclusion may seem overly harsh. The IR operators have also acknowledged and are supportive of our measures to target the financially vulnerable.

Stakeholders consulted by NCPG recognised that the term 'financially vulnerable' did not specifically refer to those with low income. Before a visit limit is imposed, NCPG would establish a Committee of Assessors to assess the financial situation of an individual on a case-by-case basis, taking into account his ability to service his debts, and the extent of his gambling activities.

Some respondents expressed concerns that the imposition of a visit limit may increase gambling intensity, and suggested to include mandatory counselling for all individuals placed under casino exclusion or visit limit. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) agrees that there is a role for casino operators to be more pro-active in their responsible gambling practices through identifying and assisting patrons who gamble intensively. Should individuals on visit limit display signs of increased gambling intensity, NCPG will evaluate the need to place such individuals under casino exclusion instead. MCYS will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the social safeguards in place and strengthen them further, if necessary.

The Government will also continue to work closely with NCPG to enhance help services for problem gamblers and the financially vulnerable, and their families.

Casino Exclusion

Members of the public and stakeholders consulted by NCPG also supported the proposed enhancements to the NCPG Casino Exclusion system. These include Provisional Family Exclusion Orders which would enable Family Exclusion Orders to be issued even if the respondent is absent or uncooperative, mandatory assessment and counselling when a

person applies for revocation of an exclusion order, and provisions to exclude a person who is vulnerable to financial harm due to gambling.

Responsible Gambling Measures

Many stakeholders commented that the casino operators can do more to ensure that their casino employees have adequate training and are given support to help at-risk gamblers at their premises.

Currently the Casino Control Act requires the casino operators to put in place a responsible gambling programme that implements a voluntary pre-commitment system, patron education and employee training. The proposed amendments to the Act will also require the casino operators to provide more details on operationalising their responsible gambling practices. The Government agrees that we should continue to enhance measures to identify and help at-risk gamblers, as well as improve public awareness of the responsible gambling initiatives already in place at the casinos.

The Government also welcomes the suggestion from NCPG's stakeholders to set up a forum between the community and gambling operators to discuss problem gambling and responsible gambling issues, and will work with the NCPG to explore this idea further.

Entry Levy

A few respondents called for an increase in the entry levy, to act as a deterrent for gamblers wanting to enter the casino. On the other hand, some respondents said that any increase to the entry levy would not deter gamblers as they could travel overseas to gamble or turn to other forms of gambling.

The entry levy is one of many social safeguards put in place to address problem gambling. The entry levy is meant to deter casual and impulse gambling and to remind Singaporeans that gambling is an expense and not a way to make a living. The Government will continue to review and, where necessary, enhance social safeguards for both casino and non-casino gambling.

Non-casino gambling

Many members of the public and stakeholders also urged the Government to look into social safeguards for non-casino gambling as tighter controls on casino social safeguards may drive individuals to other forms of gambling. The Government will work with NCPG to do more in this area. In particular, the forum proposed by NCPG (see paragraph 10 above) can discuss responsible gambling issues across all forms of gambling, and recommend effective measures against problem gambling.

Personal Responsibility

Several respondents made the point that individual and family responsibility were important dimensions in preventing and tackling problem gambling. We agree that

individuals, families and the community all play important roles in combating problem gambling. While the Government provides an overarching framework, the family and community are key lines of deterrence and support, and ultimately the individual must make a personal commitment to tackle his or her gambling problems. The casino operators also have a role to play, especially in the area of implementing responsible gambling measures and patron education.

Crime-related concerns

There has been no major adverse impact to law and order since the opening of the casinos. For 2010 and 2011, casino-related crime comprised less than 1% of overall crime. Most cases were theft-related crimes, and other isolated cases of cheating, counterfeiting and forgery. With the proposed amendments to the Casino Control Act, the penalties for casino crime will be made more severe, and casino operators will be required to take a more proactive stance to keep their premises crime-free. The authorities will also enhance our enforcement and monitoring efforts to maintain law and order within the casinos. We will continue to stay vigilant and work with the operators to ensure that the casinos remain free from criminal influence.

Some members of public expressed concern that the casinos could bring about an increase in Unlicensed Moneylending (UML) activities. The Singapore Police Force will continue its tough enforcement stance against UML activities and work closely with the community to address this scourge. Our stepped up enforcement efforts have seen the number of UML and related harassment cases fall by a fifth, from 16,834 cases in 2010 to 13,342 cases in 2011. At the same time, the number of arrests has risen by 31% to 1,981 persons in 2011.

Imposition of Financial Penalty

We received mixed views on the proposed amendment to raise the upper limit of the financial penalty which may be imposed in the event of Disciplinary Action being taken against a casino operator from the existing \$1 million to 10% of total Gross Gaming Revenue. Some respondents supported the move, while a few others were concerned about the scale of the penalty increase.

The Casino Regulatory Authority (CRA) will continue to exercise its powers judiciously, taking into account the full facts and circumstances of the case and the severity of the breach. There will continue to be proper due process in place before CRA proceeds with Disciplinary Action and before it makes a decision on the appropriate penalties to be meted out.

Tourism Performance

Many members of the public and the operators agreed that the IRs needed to keep up the development and promotion of the non-gaming attractions to remain compelling tourist destinations. An Evaluation Panel (EP) to advise CRA on the IRs' performance on the non-gaming aspects had been proposed with this in mind. Some members of the public gave

suggestions on the composition of the EP and the assessment criteria for the IRs, in order to meet our tourism objectives. The operators also highlighted the need to maintain business flexibility to meet market demands and ensure that the EP would not constrain business decisions. The Ministry of Trade & Industry (MTI) acknowledges the views given by the public and operators. In convening the EP, MTI will endeavour to appoint a panel which understands both the business needs of the IRs and the policy intent to ensure the sustainability of the IRs' economic contributions.

Economic Spin-offs

Some public feedback called on the Government to ensure that Singaporeans benefit from the jobs in the IRs. Currently, the two IRs hire about 22,000 employees, of which the majority are locals. They have also broadened the range of career opportunities for locals in new areas such as theme park management and celebrity chef restaurants. Apart from new job opportunities, the IRs have also generated additional business opportunities for companies in Singapore, particularly the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in a wide variety of industries, such as construction, security, laundry, catering and theatre prop design. MTI will work with the operators to ensure that Singaporeans and Singapore businesses continue to benefit from the economic spin-offs of the IRs.

Conclusion

The Government will study the concerns and suggestions raised as we finalise the amendments to the Casino Control Act. We would like to thank everyone who has participated in this consultation exercise.